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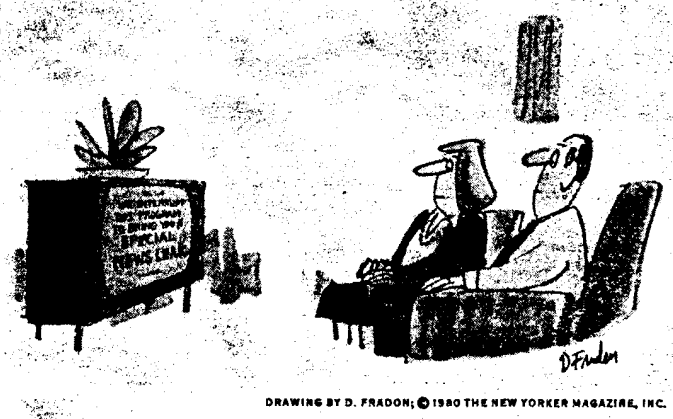
Newswatch/Thomas Griffith

A Sinking Feeling About Leaks

Already the press is getting used to the way the President-elect—at least before taking office—stays in seclusion, says nothing or prudently contents himself with brief, noncommittal, cameo appearances. In his silence, others, perhaps hoping to speak for him or eager to influence him, fill the gap. The sounds to be heard all over Washington are of trial balloons collapsing and the steady drizzle of leaks.

Much of the press lives by leaks these days, but it pays a price for them that it may not want to think about. With increased frequency, the New York *Times's* front page quotes from documents "made available to the *Times*." By whom? Not stated. That was part of the bargain. Motivated by what? Also not stated. Last week one such leak created a damaging flap around Illinois' Charles Percy, who is first in line to become chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. After more than nine hours of talks with the highest Soviet leaders in Moscow, Percy predicted that the two nations would soon be discussing arms control again. Brezhnev and Reagan, he said, were sending "signals to each other . . . in a sense through me." But then, to contradict such euphoria, "parts" of highly classified cables to the State Department from Ambassador to Moscow Thomas Watson, who had sat in on the talks, were "made available to the New York Times." The cables made the Soviets seem less eager to resume SALT. They added the piquant news that Percy told the Soviets he favored a separate Palestinian state, headed by Yasser Arafat. That did it. The Reagan people denied that Percy spoke for anyone but himself.



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Who would have reason to embarrass Percy in this fashion? And why? The Times was not about to tell its readers. But *Times* Reporter Bernard Weinraub was more scrupulous than journalists usually are in such cases. He indicated that the leak had not come from Ambassador Watson or the State Department, but from the Republican transition team, some of whose members ardently oppose SALT. Weinraub even listed six members of the transition team most dismayed by Percy's performance. Two days later the Washington *Star* identified one of the six—John Carbaugh, an aide to North Carolina's archconservative Senator Jesse Helms—as the leaker. In high dudgeon, Carbaugh demanded a lie detector test. The State Department asked the FBI last week to investigate the leak, after both Percy and Helms separately called for an inquiry. Conspiratorial types, however, suspect that Helms, who will be the second ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, is anxious to cut Percy down.

Until Reagan completes announcing his top appointments, the transition team—full of contending ideologues and power seekers—will remain the capital's center of leaks and plants. Jack Nelson, Washington bureau chief of the Los Angeles *Times*, has been cautious about playing the appointees game, which he believes some of his colleagues have been "writing too hard" and proclaiming as certain. "People have been floating too many rumors; we don't know how accurate they are, and I don't think anyone else does." He has watched the Republican team float names just to see how much opposition they generate. The process has claimed some victims. William Simon thought himself a shoo-in to be Reagan's Secretary of the Treasury. Then, after being subjected to what he calls "an overt hatchet job," including leaks about his unpopularity with some Senate Republicans, Simon withdrew, pleading personal reasons. But he is bitter, and includes "the nosiness and bias" of the press in his criticism. Unless this "savaging of public officials" abates, Simon says, businessmen will not go into Government, leaving the field "to academics and neuters." Simon is a contentious fellow, and many of his difficulties are of his own making. But he is right about the atmosphere created by leaks.

A great deal of cant surrounds the subject. In Washington, some of the most pious public denunciations of leaks come from those most artful at them. As an old Washington hand, Simon recognizes that "the ship of state is a unique vessel—it leaks from the top." Editors, in their eager appetite for both facts and scoops, can be awfully moral about protecting their sources, while in reality being very practical about not shutting off the flow. Journalists usually look to the validity of the information they are offered, and to its verifiability, more than to the motives of those who furnish it. "Everybody—the President and the president of General Motors—has a motive in giving facts to the press," says A.M. Rosenthal, the New York *Times's* executive editor. For Rosenthal, sources "may be unknown but cannot be unknowable." Only rarely, in deciding how to play a story, does he ask a reporter or editor for his confidential source, and "nobody has ever refused." That is one kind of morality at work, the pledged word. As an absolute, such morality impresses journalists more than it does outsiders, including judges.

An odd transfer of responsibility occurs when a paper stands behind an anonymous source. It thereby vouches for the story more than for stories whose origins are honestly stated. The leaker always has some self-serving motive, good or bad, but gets off scot-free while accomplishing his purpose. Think of how often in the past year "well informed" newspaper stories about policy debates over Iran, Afghanistan or Iraq have implied that National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Pentagon are decisive and tough, while the State Department is waffling and weak-kneed.

Stories whose sources are concealed from readers must be one of the chief reasons why a new poll shows that more than half of newspaper readers do not believe that papers are usually fair or accurate. (A finding, however, based on a loosely phrased question; surely skeptical newspaper readers are not questioning the accuracy of the sports scores.)

The country seems to have acquired a President whose utterances will be laconic, casual in phrasing and not too detailed in argument. This will leave others to explain the facts of a case, the give-and-take of decision making and the reasoning behind policy judgments. There will be constant questions about the degree of authority with which these others speak. The press is likely to see more leaks from unnamed sources, not fewer, in the Reagan era. The news cannot be told from official statements and handouts alone. Without betraying its anonymous sources (who often bring to light what needs to be known), the press will have to do a better job of suggesting in the story itself just what interests and motivations are involved in its publication.